

Monday: Ordinary Time 20-B

Seafarers Convention, Deroche

20 August 2018

Dear friends in Christ:

Today's Gospel

In today's Gospel, we have the account of a conversation – in fact a very structured question and answer dialogue – between Jesus, who is called “Teacher” and a young man. Both of the participants are honest and straightforward, each pushing farther and farther. Neither holds back.

I want to rehearse this q& a with you, not simply to retell the Gospel, but to help each of us place ourselves before the Lord with our hearts open in the same way as the young man's. What questions do I have, and how is Jesus answering me?

Question

The dialogue begins with an earnest and piercing question: “What good deed must I do to have eternal life” (Mt 19:16)? Or, to paraphrase a little: What can I do, what steps can I take, so that my life will have meaning?

This was not the question of a skeptic but of a pious man much like ourselves. He approached Jesus because he felt something inside. He knew there was something lacking to life; he felt “the urge to go beyond, to follow Jesus more closely. It was precisely the Holy Spirit that drove

him.”¹

I think everyone has such a question: what should I do to be a good person? A good priest or deacon or minister? Without such a question we have dulled the restlessness in our heart – indeed a great temptation today in our world of distractions. And it says that we have nothing to learn from the Lord. But he has a tailor-made answer for each of us.

Jesus’ First Response: “Keep the Commandments”

In the Gospel, the first response Jesus gives is a straightforward appeal to what was most fundamental to a devout Jew: “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments” (Mt 19:17).

The observance of the commandments is only the first step – but a necessary one – of a stairway that reaches far beyond and much farther and much higher. Observing the precepts was not enough. It did not satisfy the young man’s desire for fulfilment. Jesus perceives this deeper desire and so he Jesus asked more from him, as he does from us. And, as we shall see, he does not hesitate to let us know exactly what he expects from us.

Second Major Question of the Young Man

After responding to Jesus that he had kept the commandments – he

¹ Francis, Morning Meditation (27 May 2013).

was, after all, pious – the young intuit that more is involved in gaining “eternal life” or “life in abundance” (Jn 10:10) than observing the Decalogue. And so he asks Jesus: “what do I still lack?” (Mt 19:20).

Jesus’ Second Response: Call to Perfection

Jesus then hits the young man hard. He knows precisely what the man must do. He invites him to perfection, “if you wish to be perfect,, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor” (Mt 19:21), he says, instructing him on the path to follow if he truly wishes to follow him and have “treasure in heaven” (Mt 19:21). “Jesus invites his disciples to give their lives completely, without calculation or personal interest, with unreserved trust in God.”² Nothing less is asked of a follower of Jesus.

No More Questions: Sad Rejection

² Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily (11 October 2009).

The young man does not answer Jesus' call to come and follow him (cf. Mt 19:21). The chatty dialogue ends in silence. He gives his answer not by his words but by his action: "he went away grieving, for he had many possessions" (Mt 19:22). The Teacher had finally asked too much of him. The young man was unable to give up what was asked of him. Instead of accepting Jesus' invitation joyfully, the man went away sorrowfully, because he could not break away from his riches, that will never give him happiness and eternal life.³

Listen to Pope Francis's commentary on this passage, though he uses Mark's version of the same story:

This good man "had come with hope and with joy to see Jesus; he asked his question; he listened to Jesus' words; and he made his decision: to go away." Thus "the joy that moved him, the joy of the Holy Spirit, was turned into sadness." Indeed, Mark says that "he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions. The problem was that "his restless heart", which the Holy Spirit was prompting "to draw near to Jesus and to follow him, was a heart that was full." Yet "he did not have the courage to empty it" and instead, "he chose money!" He had "a heart filled with money. He

³ Cf. Benedict XVI, Angelus (14 October 2012).

was not a thief or a criminal. He was a good man. He never stole or cheated. His was “honest money” but “his heart was imprisoned by it, he was attached to money and he didn’t have the freedom to choose.” Therefore, in the end, “money chose for him.”⁴

⁴ Francis, Morning Meditation at Mass (3 March 2014).

“Each and every one of us needs to examine our conscience and find out what riches keep us from approaching Jesus on the road of life.”⁵ For most of us, I’m sure, it is probably not be possessions that he asks us to give up on his account. But it might well be something else. Perhaps that we forgive someone specific – a co-worker, a bishop, a relative – who has offended us or neglected us? that we leave behind our egoism and truly serve others for their interest and not for self-promotion? That we show kindness when we would rather return slight for slight?

Conclusion

Let us ask not be afraid to ask the good Lord what we must do day after day so as to respond to that incessant call: “then” – having embarked on the rough road he may foresee for us – “come, follow me” (Mt 19:21). This is what our ministry is about: following Jesus in obedience to whatever he asks of us. That’s how we will receive “treasure in heaven” (Mk 19:21), already now anticipated in the Eucharist we are celebrating.

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⁵ Francis, Morning Meditation (27 May 2013).

